

Section I

Introduction / Planning Framework

Overview

The project focused on the preparation of a comprehensive master plan for Lebanon Hills Regional Park. The planning process took into consideration the history of the site, setting, recreational and educational needs of the region, and the natural and cultural resources of the park itself. The master plan establishes a vision for the park and provides the guidelines for its ecological management and physical development to appropriately accommodate public use. The plan is also a tool for public presentations and preparing funding applications.

Although comprehensive, the master plan is still only the first step in the planning, development, and management of this unique and wonderful resource. It should be viewed as firm enough to guide park improvements, yet flexible enough to change based on increased knowledge, experience and changing public needs.

Planning Framework

The planning framework provided structure to the undertaking of this project. The framework consisted of a number of components:

- ▶ Public involvement
- ▶ Dakota County involvement
- ▶ Planning process

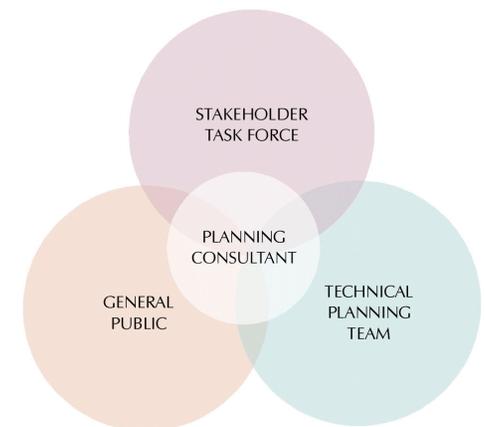
Public and Dakota County Involvement

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As the figure illustrates, the public process included a 26 member stakeholder task force composed of affected users and local agencies assembled specifically for this project. In assembling this group, Dakota County strove to include representation from all interested groups, local communities, and local and state agencies.

Figure 1.1 – Relationship between those involved in the planning process.



Under the planning framework defined by Dakota County, the task force had the following role in the project:

- ▶ Provide expertise and representation for affected interest groups.
- ▶ Provide perspective and feedback on all planning issues.
- ▶ Review and comment on all findings.
- ▶ Reach consensus a master plan.

Based on the desire to let the process run its course and allow the stakeholders enough latitude to be creative and maintain continuity with the consultant team, Dakota County Parks Department limited its role to providing technical support to the consultant team and task force. Under the umbrella of the Technical Planning Team, County staff had the following role in the project:

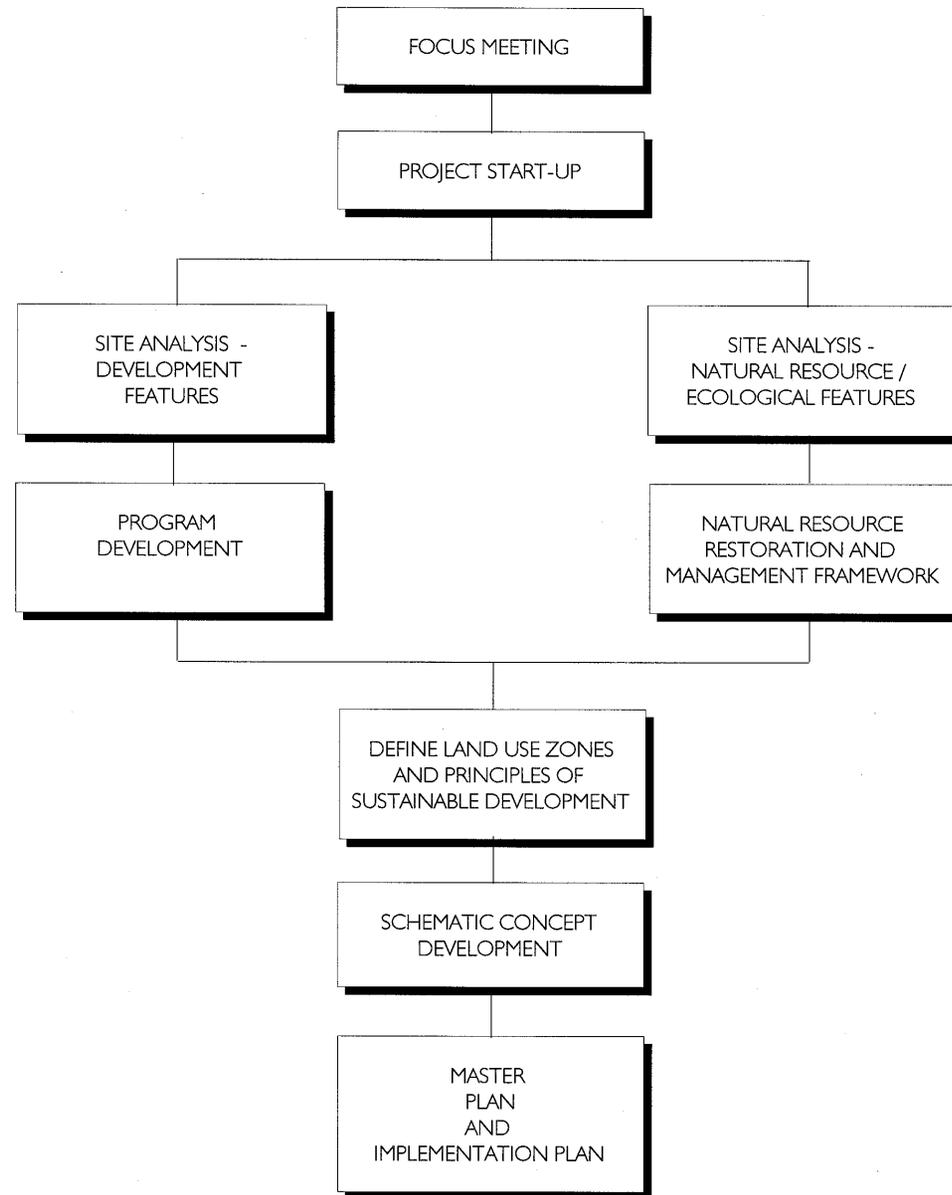
- ▶ Provide technical data and background information.
- ▶ Provide development program information that defines facility needs at Lebanon Hills from a system-wide perspective.
- ▶ Provide technical feedback on planning issues.
- ▶ Ensure that planning outcomes were in compatible with broader County and Metropolitan Council policies.
- ▶ Ensure that the park functions appropriately as part of the broader Parks System Plan for Dakota County.
- ▶ Provide professional or peer review of design and technical planning outcomes as requested by the consultant team and task force.

As will be defined in Section II, the public at-large also had a major role in the project. Through formal and informal meetings, members of the community had direct access to the consultant team and stakeholder task force. The public's input proved very fruitful and strengthened the final plan.

Planning Process

The planning of the park followed a step-by-step process that was supported by public participation each step of the way.

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Figure 1.2 - Major benchmark steps in the planning process.

Inherent to this project was finding the right balance between human use of the park and its ecological preservation and protection.

Balancing Human Use and Ecological Protection

Inherent to this project was finding the right balance between human use of the park and its ecological preservation and protection, as illustrated in figure 1.3.

Since preserving the park’s ecological values enriches the human, or cultural, experience, the planning process went to great lengths to ensure that the natural qualities of the site would remain at the forefront throughout the planning process. As shown in figure 1.4, establishing the ecological and natural resources underpinning and broad protection strategy for the park was the first step in the planning process. Once this was in place, the physical development of the park was considered, as defined by steps 2 and 3 in the illustration.

The strategy recognized the importance of the park in accommodating the public’s expectation for pleasure, health and well being through the provision of recreational opportunities. However, the strategy also ensures that the established ecological values were respected in determining the type, extent, and appropriateness of the recreational opportunities that are to be provided.

The master plan also attempts to leverage human use of the park to actually improve the prospects for its ecological protection. By focusing on cultural values that go beyond recreation to include education and individual enrichment, it is believed that awareness of the park’s natural values will be enhanced and support for its protection strengthened. By enhancing citizens’ fondness for the park and their intellectual understanding of the challenges being faced, it is believed that a bright future for the park can be assured.

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Figure 1.3 – Balancing human use and ecological protection.

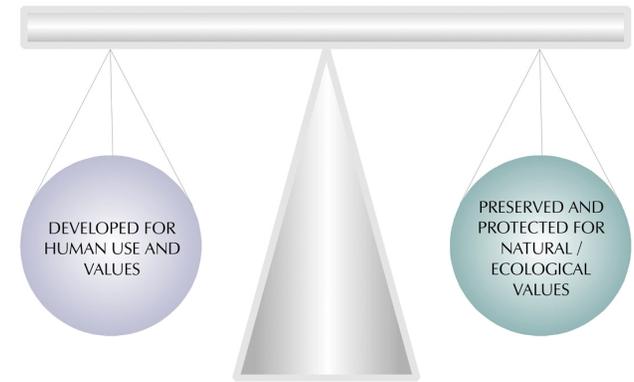


Figure 1.4 – Ensuring that ecological values set the stage for human uses.



Defining Stakeholders and Commitment to Getting Them Involved

The term stakeholder refers to anyone that has a vested interest in some aspect of the park.

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The term stakeholder is purposefully used here to underscore the importance of the views and opinions of various affected interests and then providing a plan that responds to this input in a rational and responsible way, which maximizes the derived benefits to the community.

Identifying stakeholders, getting them involved in the planning process, and building long-term relationships with them were critical steps in preparing this master plan to meet regional needs today and tomorrow. The public process used for the project allowed Dakota County to gain a much better understanding of the community’s perceptions and value system, which in turn allowed for the development of a master plan that responds to those needs.